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Return to [Contents](#), [The state](#), [Race](#), [Family](#), [Sexuality](#), [Colonialism](#)»

On being acceptable: State sanction, race privilege and lesbian and gay parents / Damien W. Riggs

Abstract: 'Positive' representations of lesbian and gay parents within the media continue to draw parallels between the experiences of heterosexual parents and those of lesbian and gay parents. Such comparisons are typically aimed at 'proving' that lesbian and gay parents are acceptable parents. There is, however, most often a failure to examine how race mediates representations of the category 'parent', the result being that references to 'parents' typically refer to white parents. The category parent is thus built upon a series of exclusions, ones with which white lesbian and gay parents may unwittingly be complicit. Through an examination of both a radio interview with the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and newspaper reports focusing on lesbian and gay parents, I explore how white heterosexual parenting becomes the norm from which white lesbian and gay parents are at times excluded, but to which those of us who identify as such parents may at times aspire. Examining the race privilege of white lesbian and gay parents, and developing an ethical framework through which to claim rights, may be one way of engaging with the problematic representation of lesbian and gay parents more broadly.

<1> Writing this paper as a white gay parent, I ask some necessarily difficult questions in relation to white lesbian and gay parenting within Australia, namely; how may a desire for state sanction lead white lesbian and gay parents to valorise particular normative forms of parenting that are premised upon the experiences of white heterosexual parents? Moreover, how may the claim that lesbian and gay parents are "just like" heterosexual parents reinforce the hegemony of white heterosexual parenting that exists currently within Australia?

<2> Questions such as these are often seen as "threatening" by other white queers, where for example I was told at a conference recently that my work on this topic could only be divisive, and that it may well serve to provide those who oppose lesbian and gay parenting in Australia with tools for further dismissing our rights claims or experiences. This may possibly be true, but it misses the point of my argument. My interest in this paper is not to provide arguments in support of lesbian and gay parenting, nor to deconstruct the truth claims of those who oppose lesbian and gay parents. Rather my aim is to explore what it means as a white lesbian or gay parent in a colonial nation such as Australia to be both threatened by the hegemony of heterosexuality that shapes discourses of parenting, whilst also potentially being seen as a threat to the sovereignty of non-white individuals. In other words, and in relation to the theme of this special issue of *Reconstruction*, my interest in this paper is to explore how white lesbian and gay parents are always-already located within a series of racialised power relations that accord us both privilege and oppression. My suggestion is that the rights claims of white lesbian and gay parents must always be viewed in a relationship to the rights claims that are concurrently denied within a colonial nation such as Australia, and how this by default positions white lesbian and gay parents as a threat to the well-being of those depicted as even less deserving of rights than us. As such, my focus is intentionally *not* on the discrimination faced by those of us who identify as white lesbian or gay

parents (though at the same time I am neither ignorant nor dismissive of such discrimination). Instead my starting place is an examination of race privilege: how are white lesbians and gay men in Australia always-already racialised as white, and how does this accrue to those of us who identify in this way a vast number of privileges that exist alongside our experiences of discrimination?

<3> Much like the person at the aforementioned conference who took offence at my suggestion that claiming rights through a notion of injury may serve to undermine queer rights claims, there will no doubt be a wide range of objections to my claims within this paper. Indeed, I am keenly aware of the privilege I hold not only as a white person in a colonial society, but as a male in a patriarchal society. As such I seek to engage in a form of accountable praxis by beginning the work of examining how it is that white lesbian and gay parents are always-already positioned through simultaneous discourses of race and sexuality (amongst others), which grant us (at times) viable subject positions that may threaten or overwrite the rights claims of groups of people who may (or may not) also identify as queer, but who are not identified as white. My suggestion is thus that there is a pressing need to begin any work in the area of rights claims for white lesbian and gay parents by first examining how privilege operates within queer communities, and to acknowledge the incommensurabilities that exist between the experiences of white and non-white people in Australia, shaped as they are through racialised power relations.

<4> In order to further explicate the above points, I begin by exploring some of the ways in which lesbian and gay headed families have been denied a place within the category "family" by the incumbent coalition government in Australia. By examining one particular radio transcript featuring Prime Minister John Howard, I propose not only that the exclusion of lesbian and gay parents from the category family reinforces a normative heterosexuality as central to the Australian nation, but also that this heterosexuality is conceptualised as being always-already white. From there I will propose that if heterosexuality (as well as heterosexual parenting more specifically) is fundamentally a *white* heterosexuality, then this holds important implications not only for understanding how white hegemony functions in Australia, but also for how those of us who identify as white lesbian or gay parents negotiate our location as *white people* within the Australian nation (Nicoll "After"). My suggestion here is that whilst, yes, the hegemony of heterosexual parenting is indeed a threat to the lives of white lesbian and gay parents in that it often curtails our experience and expression of our parenting role, it is nonetheless the case that our ability to locate ourselves to some extent *within* the boundaries of whiteness would suggest that our location within this privileged space positions us as a threat to the rights of those who are positioned without - our accrual of unearned race privilege comes largely at the expense of those to whom rights are constantly denied.

<5> As an example of how the norm of white heterosexual parenting functions within Australia, I then explore a number of instances where lesbian or gay parents are represented as being "just like" heterosexual parents within the news media. In these examples heterosexuality is taken as being the "gold standard" to which lesbian or gay parents should aspire. I suggest that in taking on board a particular set of normative terms for parenting, white lesbian or gay parents may well be complicit with the forms of threat that are produced through white claims to national belonging within Australia. In other words, if white heterosexual parenting is the norm from which all other parents are seen to deviate, and if white lesbian and gay parents attempt, or indeed succeed, in approximating this norm, then our relative successes (and the privileges that this affords us) will quite possibly be counter to the need for recognition of parents who are not identified as white. This suggests to me that what is required is an account of the moral responsibilities that are produced as a result of being a white lesbian or gay parent living in a colonial nation such as Australia, a form of accountability that recognises our position as always-already being both threatened and threatening. To counter this I propose a reflexive approach to a broader queer ethics that may inform how rights are claimed by white lesbian and gay parents, and, drawing on the work of white feminists, I briefly outline an account of moral accountability that may more productively engage with the race privilege held by white queer people.

'Certain benchmark institutions'

<6> In this first section of the paper I explore in greater depth some of the arguments that I introduced earlier, namely those relating to how lesbians and gay men are excluded from the category of 'family', and how this category is constructed by politicians such as Prime Minister Howard as being not only avowedly heterosexual, but also markedly white. From a corpus of eight radio interviews with Prime Minister Howard in which he talks about same-sex marriage, adoption, parenting and access to reproductive technologies, the two extracts used in this section were chosen as they reflect some of the broader themes that appear across all eight interviews, and also because they offer some insight into how Prime Minister Howard positions the white heterosexual family as integral to the Australian nation. The extract that follows appeared approximately a third of the way into the transcript of the interview, before which Prime Minister Howard and the radio announcer spoke about a range of topics, including "terrorism", public utilities and abortion. Before taking calls from the general public the conversation turned to the topic of refugees. The Prime Minister can be seen to provide an account of how it is that refugee families (and in particular one Hazara family who are referred to by the Prime Minister within the extract) are effectively excluded from claiming a place within the Australian nation.

Announcer: Prime Minister... a family in Adelaide, the Bakhtyari children are being cared for in Adelaide by Centrecare, they're in one house. Their mother is not very far away, she's under effective guard in a motel with her baby. Their father's in the Baxter Detention Centre. So, how are you able to allow that situation to continue? Do you feel uncomfortable...?

Prime Minister: Well, I wish it were otherwise, I wish the processes were a little faster...

Announcer: You can...?

Prime Minister: No, no, not without compromising a policy that we're not willing to compromise.

Announcer: But the policy may not be a good policy... that you've allowed that to happen.

Prime Minister: Well, I don't agree with that. I think we've had this debate, I mean, I'm happy to keep debating it, but obviously, the fewer people there are in detention the more that it is satisfactory to us, the more we like it. I don't like people being detained, but mandatory detention is part of the system.

Announcer: How do you as an individual reconcile that? I mean, I don't know whether these things worry you. I would think they do.

Prime Minister: A lot of things worry me, Matt. I worry about a lot of people in refugee camps who are waiting to find a home to go to. There are millions of people in refugee camps. I believe very strongly that an orderly settlement policy is the best policy and the more we can prevent illegal arrivals the greater is our capacity to provide places in Australia for people who've been waiting in refugee camps for years.

Announcer: I know, but when bureaucracy gets down to... when a policy gets down to the human level like this...

Prime Minister: Yes, but I mean, I can equally say there are... I could talk about the plight of a family in a refugee camp... And their plight is the product in part of the fact that places may have been taken by less deserving cases and less meritorious people (Howard).

<7> In this first extract the radio announcer draws the Prime Minister's attention to the problems facing one particular refugee family, who were separated as a result of the mandatory detention policy that currently exists within Australia. In this example the children are living away from their mother and father, and the radio announcer attempts to draw the Prime Minister into accounting for this. The Prime Minister signals his sympathy for the family in his statement "I wish it were otherwise",

though this is followed by an implicit "but"; that it cannot be otherwise because that would mean "compromising a policy that we're not willing to compromise". In order to distance himself from the fact that the policy he promotes is in effect dividing a family (one that takes the form he himself privileges across the entire corpus of interviews examined for this paper - that of the heterosexual nuclear family), the Prime Minister diverts attention away from his own opinions, and instead focuses on the "fact" of mandatory detention - that it is just "part of the system", and that he as Prime Minister is unable (as opposed to unwilling) to change the system. The announcer then counters this by asking the Prime Minister how he "as an individual" reconciles mandatory detention with the separation of families. The announcer's use of the word "worry" provides the Prime Minister with an opportunity to return again to his own claims to sympathy "as an individual", when he states that he worries about "a lot of things", including the "millions of people in refugee camps". Yet his claims to worry also allow the Prime Minister to go on to delineate who will, and who will not, be worthy of his worry - he will *not* worry about those he classifies as "illegal" or "less deserving". Finally, the announcer introduces the category "human" in order to call the Prime Minister to account for what the policy of mandatory detention means "at the human level". Whilst not ignoring the announcer's challenge (and in particular its implications for the Bakhtyari family), the Prime Minister does manage to maintain his focus on those who are worthy of his worry - "a family in a refugee camp" - those who are implicitly positioned as both "deserving" and "meritorious".

<8> What we can see from this extract is that Prime Minister Howard is actively involved in delineating the limits of acceptance that will be extended to refugee families. Families who are in "refugee camps" (i.e., not in Australia) are positioned as objects to be worried about, whilst families who have already entered Australia (the implication being illegally, as it is only through arriving without official sanction that refugees are placed in mandatory detention) are deemed less worthy of worry. In this way the Prime Minister is able to maintain a clear distinction between what is implicitly constructed as the "enemy family within" (i.e., those who are "illegal", "less deserving" and "less meritorious"), and those who are comfortably seen as the "pitiable family without" (i.e., those who have not yet entered Australia). As such, and without having to explicitly say so, Prime Minister Howard subtly positions the Bakhtyari family as deserving of their situation. In this sense, their status as a family is not recognised, nor is their family form considered of importance to the Australian nation. At stake here is not only the government's policy around mandatory detention, but also the vision promoted by the government (and Prime Minister Howard in particular) of what an "Australian family" will look like. Whilst no explicit mention is made in this first extract of white Australian families, the implication of the Prime Minister's position on refugees is that whilst certain families are deemed worthy of worry, they are not necessarily also worthy of sanction other than through an "orderly settlement policy". And even through that particular channel there is no suggestion that an official offer of sanction would actually result in a refugee family being considered part of (rather than tolerated by) the white Australian nation (see also Hage 1998).

<9> The Prime Minister's understanding of what will count as a sanctioned family is rendered more clearly in the following extract, where a caller challenges his position on "gay people" and our families.

Caller: Good morning Cameron, Mr Howard, as far as governments go it's not your place as a government to tell me how to live my life, you don't provide me important choice and recognition of diversity of families and society, but you use your religion to make judgments on gay people and therefore the rights that we have with regards to superannuation property entitlement, why not use your tolerance and understanding as a Christian to recognise our rights the same as you?

Prime minister: Well I don't criticise gay people for that lifestyle, that's their choice. What I do say, and I don't apologise for saying, is that there are certain benchmark institutions in our society that ought to be defended and promoted and marriage is one of them and the reason I don't support gay marriage is that I think it in different ways reduces the status of marriage as so commonly understood in our society,

that is partly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition of our society, it's also influenced by other things as well, it's not only people of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is obviously the dominant one in our country, who hold that view, others hold it as well, but there has to be a point at which you stand up for certain benchmark institutions. I don't think that's intolerant, I think it's common sense because they contribute to the continuity and the stability of society.

Announcer: Do you regard a gay couple with a child, either adopted or via IVF, as a family?

Prime Minister: Well it's not a family in the more popular traditional sense, look I don't want to condemn, see those questions are really designed, and I'm sure this wouldn't be your motive, but those questions are designed to sort of to elicit a response that can then be typified oh he doesn't like gay people. What I'm in favour of is defending the benchmark institutions of our society and marriage is one of them and I think we should always have a margin for marriage if I can put it that way
(Howard)

<10> In this extract the caller draws attention to the religious values that they believe inform the government's position on queer rights. In contrast to the caller's demand for "recognition of [the] diversity of families", the Prime Minister is quick to position gay identities as "lifestyle choices", an argument that is consistently made by the Christian right (for example) in order to exclude the category of sexuality from human rights sanction. Howard then goes on to depict the "benchmark institution" of heterosexual marriage as "contribut[ing] to the continuity and stability of society". Not only does the Prime Minister reinforce the centrality of the heterosexual nuclear family to the stability of the nation, but he also reasserts the centrality of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" to his vision of an inherently *white* nation. By implication not only does he exclude lesbian and gay families from contributing to social stability, but he also excludes those families (such as the Bahktyari family) who do not identify with the "Judeo-Christian tradition" (in addition to those families who identify as both queer and non-Christian). Whilst Howard acknowledges that the "Judeo-Christian tradition" is the "dominant one in our country", he does not see this as a negative thing, but rather as something to be promoted or protected. In response to the announcer's direct question about whether a "gay couple with a child" would be classified by the Prime Minister as a family, Howard in effect sidesteps the question by positioning it as a rhetorical device aimed at depicting him as engaged in discrimination against queer families. In a sense Howard is able to position both the announcer and queer families themselves as at fault for his discriminatory response - he is only forced to reaffirm his commitment to the "benchmark institution" of heterosexual marriage because queer people are seeking to gain access to marriage. As a result, heterosexual marriage and the heterosexual nuclear family are depicted as being under threat by the call for same-sex marriage.

<11> Looking at the two previous extracts in conjunction, it is possible to see how Howard provides an account of the category "family" within Australia that is not only explicitly heterosexual, but which also privileges the values of the white, Judeo-Christian majority. In the first extract the Prime Minister reaffirms not only that he believes the policy of mandatory detention to be an important one, but that the status of refugee families as deserving of either worry or sanction is contingent not upon the adverse situations that they face, but rather upon their willingness to submit to the conditions for belonging set by the white Australian nation. Whilst Howard expresses worry over families in refugee camps, he nonetheless says nothing about the multiple ways in which the Australian government could (if it so desired) assist such families, nor does he mention the ways in which he and his government have actively sought to provide misinformation to the Australian public about the plight of refugee families (e.g., in regards to the Tampa incident [1]). As such, Howard implicitly constructs the category "acceptable family" within the first extract as definitely not the Bahktyari family, but also not any of the refugees currently seeking sanction within Australia. Whilst some refugees families - on the terms set by the Howard government - will be eligible for refugee status, this does not automatically translate into a desire for such families to come to Australia on the part of the

government, nor does it mean that such families will ever be considered a part of the dominant white vision of families in Australia.

<12> This depiction of acceptable families as being implicitly "white" is subtly reinforced in the second extract, where reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition is used to bolster Howard's arguments about who will be offered state sanction or representation within the white Australian nation. The category "family" is represented as both nominally heterosexual and nominally white - as constituted through the forms of family privileged within the Christian religion. Heterosexual whiteness is thus taken not only as the norm, but also as natural. This is achieved through a contrast with queer identities (white or otherwise), which are represented as "choices" that are not essential to social stability.

<13> Howard's desire to perpetuate an image of the Australian nation as solidly heterosexual and white is certainly challenged within the extracts when he implicitly acknowledges that certain refugee families are deserving of worry, or where he depicts calls for same-sex marriage as threatening to the "benchmark" of heterosexual marriage. At the same time, however, Howard reasserts the normative status of heterosexual whiteness through his reiteration of the policy of mandatory detention, and through his dismissal of queer rights claims as inessential rights called for by undeserving people who make unnecessary choices.

<14> My analysis within this section has suggested two important things: that only certain heterosexual families will be accorded recognition or belonging (i.e., white heterosexual families, not heterosexual families seeking refuge), and that only certain white people are eligible for particular rights (i.e., heterosexual white people, not queer white people). Yet whilst it is indeed the case that the Prime Minister constructs heterosexuality as implicitly white, and whilst the opposite is also taken to be true - that the only valid form of whiteness is heterosexual - this does not stop white queer people from attempting to claim a place within the white Australian nation. Simply because white queer people are denied certain rights by the current Coalition government does not stop white queer people (such as myself) benefiting from race privilege. This is a point that I believe requires further elaboration, and it is to this that I turn in the following section.

"Children can grow up happily and fulfilled with gay or lesbian parents"

<15> There is a growing body of research that seeks to deconstruct claims to "normality" or "sameness" in regards to lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke "Lesbian"; Clarke "Sameness"; Hicks "Empty"; Hicks "Gay"; Riggs "Resisting"; Riggs "Proving"). Such research has not sought to undermine the claims of lesbian and gay parents *per se*, but rather to look at the political, personal and social implications of claiming that lesbian and gay parents are "just like" heterosexual parents. In particular, it has been suggested: that such claims promote heterosexual parenting as the "gold standard" against which all parenting is measured; notions of sameness ignore the very radical differences that shape the lives of lesbian and gay parents; claims to normality in effect deny the positive benefits that can be gained from living within lesbian or gay headed households; and finally, that a focus on similarities between heterosexual and queer parents effectively shifts attention away from the ways in which institutionalised discrimination serves to oppress queer parents. My interest in this section is not to rehearse these arguments *per se*, but instead to look at how it is that claims to "sameness" operate when (implicitly) white lesbian and gay parents claim a similarity with white heterosexual parents.

<16> The extracts examined in this section come from a corpus of six articles from Australian newspapers, including two from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, two from *The Australian*, one from *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane) and one from *The Advertiser* (Adelaide). Whilst a relatively small sample, the extracts examined here are indicative of broader trends within media reporting of lesbian and gay parents, both within Australia and abroad, and within mainstream and gay news media (Clarke "Lesbian"; Clarke "Sameness"; Riggs "Proving"). The following examples demonstrate some of the myriad ways in which lesbian and gay parents are depicted as being "just like" heterosexual parents.

The research uniformly finds that the children of heterosexual

and homosexual parents show no differences in levels of self esteem, happiness, psychiatric state, quality of friendships, popularity or social acceptance, sexual orientation, gender role or gender identity, or level of happiness with their family identity. (Millbank).

The books were not about promoting a gay lifestyle, but presenting those within same-sex couple families as ordinary, regular people who did normal, everyday things (Burke).

[Research has] found that families created by artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilisation and surrogacy were, if anything, internally happier than other families (Bachelard).

A families expert believes children can grow up happily and fulfilled with gay or lesbian parents. Dr John Irvine, an author and child psychologist, said gay couples were equally capable of raising children and should be considered the same as single parents (Dullroy).

<17> In regards to the claims made in these extracts that social scientific research continues to "prove" that children of heterosexual and queer parents show no differences, this is in fact not conclusively the case. A notable paper by Judith Stacey and Thomas Biblarz suggests that there are important differences between the two groups and that this should be considered a positive, rather than negative, finding. More important, however, is the fact that the overwhelming majority of research on lesbian and gay parenting focuses on or uses as its sample the experiences of *white* lesbian and gay parents. Whilst of course it is true that some studies do include non-white parents (e.g., Hill), it is primarily the case that the statements or claims made about lesbian and gay parents are based on research conducted with *white* people.

<18> Not only are the above extracts racialised in relation to the claims made in regards to research on lesbian and gay parents, but they are also reliant upon a number of normative racialised assumptions about what constitutes parenting more broadly. There continues to be a sustained critique, in particular by African-American scholars, of the ways in which non-white parents are depicted as variously dangerous, unfit or otherwise unable to care for their children (e.g., hooks). In Australia, for example, we continue to see media representations of Indigenous parents as unable to adequately care for their children, a legacy of the ideologies informing government policies of child removal that existed in Australia up until the late 1900s. Ideologies such as these have ongoing effects in the lives of Indigenous people who were stolen from their families. Such ideologies are evidenced by the fact that removal rates of Indigenous children for far less serious cases of child neglect currently far exceed comparable rates for white children in Australia. As a result, claims such as "same-sex couple families [are] ordinary, regular people who [do] normal, everyday things" may be read as a markedly racialised statement. Representations of parents as people who do "normal things" and who are "regular people" are typically reserved within the Australian media for white parents. Indigenous families and parents (for example) are most often represented either as making exceptional achievements, or as failing to provide adequate care for children.

<19> In addition to the previous point about the claim that "same-sex couple families [are] ordinary, regular people", I would point out that the books referred to in that extract (e.g., Harding and Harding) feature two lesbian mothers and their daughter - all white, with almost exclusively white friends, living in a context of relative economic and personal security (see Riggs and Augoustinos for an elaboration of this point about representations of lesbian and gay parents in children's story books). To be "ordinary", "regular", "normal" and "everyday" in this sense is to be white. Lesbian and gay parents who do not identify as white are thus afforded little representation or space within these types of news media accounts.

<20> Finally, issues surrounding the use of reproductive technologies by lesbian parents have received considerable attention within the media. Many white lesbian and gay activists have called upon discourses of "human rights" in order to justify access for lesbians and gay men. Yet, recent analyses of human rights rhetoric (Harding; Riggs *Priscilla*) have suggested that such rhetoric may be of little use to lesbians and gay men in fighting for access to reproductive technologies, as they are reliant

upon the interpretative judgment of the law. Moreover, recourse to notions of "human rights" often ignore the racialised nature of the category "human", and the attendant presumptions which often normalise the values and experiences of white men and women. In this regard, Indigenous (Moreton-Robinson) and African American (hooks) scholars have drawn attention to the fact that at the same time as white women have advocated the "right to choose" whether or not to get pregnant or to carry through with a pregnancy, Indigenous and African American women have been fighting against involuntary sterilisation and the removal of their children. In addition to the fact that Indigenous women in Australia have had to fight against sterilisation and the forced removal of their children, Steinberg points out that access to reproductive technologies, even in the light of human rights claims, are still mediated by economics *in conjunction with race*. Thus many Indigenous lesbians or gay men seeking to access reproductive technologies may not be able to do so even if the laws were changed - the racialised nature of socio-economic status may prevent access to these costly procedures. This is of course not to deny that many white lesbians (in particular) are denied access to reproductive technologies, but rather to highlight the differential ways in which race impacts upon access to such technologies for queer parents, dependent upon their racial identity.

<21> Thus in regards to the final news extract above, I would propose that claims that "gay couples are equally capable of raising children" refer primarily to *white* gay couples being "equally capable of raising children" as *white* heterosexual couples. Whilst reports such as these may be considered a step forward, in that they at least acknowledge (to varying degrees) the validity of lesbian and gay parenting, they do so by both ignoring the racialised nature of such claims, and by privileging the values and experiences of white queer people. Thus as I suggested in the previous section, not only is heterosexual parenting the norm from which all other parenting is seen to deviate, but it is white heterosexual parenting that is represented as the only valourised form of parenting within Australia. When white lesbian and gay parents claim to approximate the norm of white heterosexual parenting we are thus using our race privilege to claim an (admittedly circumscribed) location within a national space that is idealised as wholly white. In so doing we claim to be "just like" white heterosexual parents, and our desire for rights thus comes very much at the same expense as do white heterosexual rights - it is reliant (amongst other things) upon the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous land and the ongoing construction of non-white people as either enemies of the state or incapable parents.



Towards a reflexive queer ethics of race privilege and rights claims

<22> In this final section of the paper, I draw upon the work of white lesbian feminists in order to sketch out one shape that a broader queer ethics in the context of a colonial nation such as Australia could take in regards to rights claims and queer parenting. My intention in briefly elaborating an approach to ethics is to outline how it may be that white queer people can be accountable for our race privilege in ways that do not seek to deny the threat that we represent to the rights and sovereignty of those people positioned as non-white. In suggesting this, my understanding of what constitutes an ethical engagement on the part of white queer people is one that encourages us to be confronted by the threats that we may experience in our daily life, and to do this by simultaneously maintaining a focus on our race privilege. Such a claim to an ethical position would not be so as to valourise white queer pain, or to deny the existence of such pain. Rather, my point is that there may often be moments where those of us who identify as white queer people need to be willing to examine the discomfort that may be produced through the juxtaposition of our experiences of threat on the one hand, and our role as people who potentially threaten others on the other. In this sense, what I am constructing as a queer ethics of engagement is a specifically *white* queer ethics of engagement, and one that recognises the very specific configurations of privilege and oppression that shape white queer experience. My use of the word "reflexive" highlights the need for white queer people to move beyond a simplistic notion of discrimination on the basis of sexuality, and to instead develop a more nuanced account of how power relations circulate simultaneously through discourses of race, gender, sexuality and class to name but a few.

<23> I take as my starting point for the elaboration of a white queer ethics two quotes that I believe signal two of the key strands of thought that require attention in regards to any form of queer ethics, particularly as elaborated by white queers. The first comes from Margaret Urban Walker, who suggests that:

The recent feminist challenge to the legitimacy of moral philosophizing... requires that any ethics done must become politically self-conscious and reflexively critical, and that the impetus to this must be *right in* the kind of ethics any of us do, not an addendum or postscript to it (24, original emphasis).

The second comes from Marilyn Frye, who Walker discusses in her own paper. Frye suggests that:

My intuition is that the need for an ethics is race, class and history specific. It is a need felt by people with an investment of a certain sort in being good and/or in others' being good, in doing the right thing, being right, or being in the right. Not everyone at every time has such an investment (133).

<24> The quote from Frye echoes my own concerns within this paper in regards to what it means to claim parenting rights on the basis of "sameness". Thus as Frye suggests, the need to claim a position of "moral good" is almost certainly a desire specific to certain contexts, and to the lives of particular people. This suggests to me that at certain times and for particular people there is a great deal to be gained by claiming moral authority (e.g., in claiming to be a "good parent"). Claiming to be "acting from good" can allow certain groups of people to assert the validity of their truth claims, and it can afford certain groups of people the moral high-ground. This of course is not inherently problematic. I am most certainly making a moral argument of sorts in this paper - that queer rights requires accountability in regards to race and race privilege. What I think the quote from Walker suggests, however, and in accordance with her argument that there is a necessary distinction to be made between theories of morality and a project of ethics, is that it is possible to speak about queer ethics without them necessarily being totalistic or prescriptive.

<25> Returning to the quote from Frye, where her argument is at its strongest, is her suggestion that the use of moral claims to warrant a "good queer identity" or to bolster one's own argument is primarily the province of those who hold the privilege necessary to do so. Moral claims require not only a particular stand on morality, but also in practice require a place from which to speak them *and to expect them to be heard*. To claim the moral high-ground is thus often an action made by those accorded the right to speak - in this instance, white queer parents. When those of us who identify as white speak out in regards to rights, and assert that we are entitled to do so, we draw upon our privilege as white people living in a society that accords us significant social status, *regardless of our sexuality* .

<26> What this suggests to me, along the lines of Walker's statement, is that white queers may speak of ethics *only if* we do so through a critically reflexive lens - if we take our primary ethical obligation as being the need to be accountable for our privilege, and from that starting place to elaborate how we may claim rights *on the contingency of that initial recognition*. This would also require recognition of the potential for incommensurability in regards to moral positions. In other words, differing queer claims to ethical positions may be inherently incompatible - it may be neither possible nor desirable to reconcile the needs of white queers and non-white queer parents, or indeed those of white queer parents and non-white heterosexual parents. Finally, and following the points made in the quote from Frye, it is important to acknowledge that what is required from a white queer ethics is not for white queer people to be "better queers" by being "good queers" who are accountable for our race privilege (see also Nicoll "Indigenous"; Riggs "Benevolence"). Being willing to acknowledge our implication in the functioning of threat in colonial nations must be the product of recognising the privileges that we hold, rather than as part of a move towards "absolving" ourselves of our race privilege. So, yes, as Frye suggests, the need for ethics is often the province of those seeking to claim a position of moral good, but this does not have to be the only role accorded to a white queer ethics. Such an ethics may instead be about acknowledging the problems that arise when white people attempt to claim for ourselves a position of "good". This

would suggest to me that it is important to examine how claims to moral worth by dominant group members have often been productive of ongoing histories of violence against dispossessed and marginalised groups of people. Speaking of a white queer ethics may thus be less about a desire for claiming a "good" subject position from which to speak, and more about acknowledging the role that claims to moral virtue often play in acts of violence and oppression. To speak as a white queer person is thus to speak from a range of subject positions that are always-already located within a relationship to institutional practices that are productive of white hegemony, an acknowledgment of which will necessarily produce many forms of discomfort that must be examined, rather than dismissed.

Conclusions

<27> My intention within this paper has been to draw attention to some aspects of lesbian and gay parenting that have thus far gone largely unexamined. In speaking as a white gay parent, I have sought to develop a form of accountability that is less about simply "owning up" to my race privilege, and more about looking at how race privilege functions both in the service of white hegemony, and in the service of particular rights claims. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that white queer people in Australia experience considerable hardship, and are constantly under threat of erasure from the coalition government, it is nonetheless the case that those of us who identify as white queers nonetheless stand to benefit from our racial location. In stating this, my intention has not been to "rank oppressions" so as to decree who is most injured by institutionalised discrimination. Rather, my point is that before we can effectively develop any form of coalitional queer politics, there is a pressing need to explore the incommensurabilities that shape queer communities, and which inform the lives of all queer people.

<28> I don't believe that critiques of white queer privilege, such as those within this paper, need necessarily be considered a threat to queer politics, nor yet another tool of the oppressor. Rather, they may be but one step towards acknowledging white queer people's own role in threatening the safety of those positioned as non-white, and the considerable amount of work that must be done to challenge how white hegemony functions in colonial nations such as Australia. Calls for tolerance, or bridging gaps, or standing together will only do so much if the ground upon which we stand continues to be one that is stolen from Indigenous peoples. Focusing on the race privilege held by queer parents need not be seen as undermining current rights claims, but rather may be understood as an attempt at examining how such claims function, and how they may develop in the future. Relying solely upon claims to injury or "proof" of our normality or sameness, may do very little to shift the power relations that currently inform relations between white queer people and the state. Speaking of accountability and examining simultaneous occurrences of privilege and oppression may represent one way of holding in balance the pain of white queer lives and the privileges that white queers hold.

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Notes

[1] The Tampa incident refers to a series of events that took place in August and September of 2001. The MS Tampa, A Norwegian shipping vessel, picked up 430 refugees whose boat floundered near Australian waters. The Australian government, however, refused to allow the boat to land in Australia, and those seeking refuge were subsequently sent to Nauru (where they were detained without representation for considerable periods of time). The Howard government used the incident as an opportunity to send what they claimed was 'a clear message that Australia is not a soft touch'. The refugees themselves were denied access to representation and legal counsel, and the Australian public were only provided with selected information about the refugees, who were depicted as scheming and undeserving, rather than legitimately fleeing for their lives and in extreme states of ill health. The Howard government also introduced an emergency bill - the Border Protection Bill 2001 - to prevent the refugees arriving in Australia (See Burnside for a further elaboration of this).
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Return to [Top»](#)